

Time Off



The cultural fortnight ahead

Grave observation

Dhruv Malhotra's Noida photographs

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PARANOID TENDENCIES

Dhruv Malhotra sees the light in night-time Noida, says **Jane Mikkelsen**.

What does the soliloquy have to do with Noida? Not a whole lot, at first pass. On one hand, there is the literary device that has a character alone and talking to himself (the word's literal derivation). Used by the likes of Shakespeare, a soliloquy weighs ponderous questions about life, morality and the meaning of it all, such as "To be or not to be?"

On the other hand, there is the Uttar Pradesh chunk of the National Capital Region, the poetic acronym of the decidedly un-poetic Naveen Okhla Industrial Development Authority, whose connotations include IT outsourcing

centres, mega-malls, eight-lane highways, angry farmers and a metastatic rate of expansion. Although there is nothing new about an artist romanticising the un-romantic, Dhruv Malhotra, the self-taught photographer behind the exhibition *Noida Soliloquy* at Photoink this fortnight, has managed to cast Noida in a startling new light.

Malhotra has the threefold distinction of being a resident of Noida, a photographer and an insomniac. This has proven to be a potent combination. All the photographs in *Noida Soliloquy* were taken between dusk and dawn

in what we'd think of as the least evocative spaces in a city: empty parking lots, dilapidated construction sites, desolate roadsides and fields. "There's been so much construction over the last five years in Noida, and in between these construction sites are pockets of space that are just...waiting," Malhotra said cryptically. "That disparity is something I've tried to capture."

The first thought that comes to mind when looking at Malhotra's photographs is that there is no way they could have been shot at night. The colours are so luminous and satu-

Apocalypse now Malhotra's photographs of a parking lot (opposite page) and the Mayawati statues (above) in Noida



rated that they might easily have been taken from a fluorescent-pen palette: the grass is acid-green, and the sky is at times blood-orange, graphite-grey, yolky yellow and cobalt-blue – but never black, as one would expect at night. The cause of these otherworldly hues is the exceptionally long exposure time, which Malhotra said ranged from five to 40 minutes per photograph. Over such a prolonged period, the film absorbs all the incidental lights passing by, and the gradual accumulation of these stray rays of moonlight, starlight, headlights and streetlights gives the photographs their vividness. It's a delicate process: there is a limit to how long film can be exposed before something called "reciprocity failure" sets in (after which the film becomes damaged and can no longer function properly). Malhotra walks right up to that limit. "The intent was to open up this darkness and to see as much as is possible to be seen," he said.

Turns out, there is a lot to be seen. In a photograph of a parking lot (overleaf), nothing seems out of the ordinary at first glance: there are no cars or people, the midday sky looks overcast and grey, and it comes off as an altogether drab and dreary place, certainly not a suitable stage for a soliloquy of any kind. On closer inspection though, a detail comes to the viewer's attention, and it's hard not to be bowled over by its significance: the lampposts cast no shadows. In fact, nothing does. Everything in the photograph that is seen in such crisp, clinical detail – down to every pebble and puddle – is in reality shrouded in dark-

ness and invisible to the naked eye; what we perceive as daytime is actually the middle of the night.

Once this crucial moment of reversal has passed, everything in the photograph appears literally in a different light: we notice that the bare-branched tree in the background has cast an incongruous spider web onto the adjacent building, though its shadow – if that's what it is – bears little resemblance to the original. This effect could be the result of somebody turning on a light in a window for a few minutes, followed perhaps by a car driving by, its headlights hitting the tree from a different angle. Then there is the eerie blue glow emanating from behind the skeletal tree, from a source we can only speculate about.

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This may not have been Malhotra's primary intent, but the sum of these revelations and the absence of people have a distinctly unsettling effect. Like the hero in *28 Days Later* (director Danny Boyle's aubade to zombies, in which the desolate London scenes were all filmed at dawn), we awaken to discover an abandoned

city and we see it with new eyes, slightly paranoid, with no idea what creeping crepuscular creatures might lurk around the next corner. Like Hamlet, we see ghosts where we thought there ought to be none.

The unsettling impression deepens when we look at Malhotra's photograph of the Mayawati statues (above). Hooded with bright-blue tarpaulin, they stand like phantasmagorical figures against a Martian sky. The inexplicable concrete pillar behind them makes it look almost like they have gathered for some apocalyptic ritual. Here the passage of time is more obvious: the stars leave bright trails, filling the sky with something like the prophesied rain of fire at the End of Days.

The other photographs in *Noida Soliloquy* also glow with the same lambent light that throws their unlikely subjects – a white plastic rabbit abandoned in the scrub, a lone gravestone, countless pylons – into stark relief. Especially impressive is a series of photographs taken of "sleepers", the only human subjects in the entire exhibition. With not a waking soul in his photographs or around him as he worked, Malhotra's reflections on the Noida landscape are exactly a soliloquy. The sleepers slept on, unaware of him as he spent half an hour standing motionless a few feet away, his camera trained on their recumbent forms, turning the darkness around them into colours with every passing minute.

The exhibition is up at Photoink until Tue Jun 15. See Listings in Art for details.

